HEADLINE:

BYLINE: Gamuchirai Masiyiwa

EDITOR:

FACT CHECKER:

COPY EDITOR:

PHOTO: Austin Bachand

PHOTO CREDIT: Gamuchirai Masiyiwa, GPJ Zimbabwe

KICKER:

QUOTE: “It a dangerous game, sometimes water will be flowing underground but it’s better to risk than sit because I do not have many options in place to take care of my family,” says Karambakuwa(CQ).

TAGS: mining, gold, artisanal miners, death.

CONTENT TYPE: Local Coverage

WORD COUNT:

Narrative Lead

Bindura, Zimbabwe – Piles of red soil, buzzing noise from grinding mills characterize Kitsiyatota,(CQ) a mining area in Bindura a town north-east of Harare (CQ_Link).

As part of preparing to get underground, Lloyd Karambakuwa (40) (CQ_Sourcesheet) puts on a worn-out short, a torch on his forehead and throws his equipment into a shallow tunnel. He climbs down using a rope tied to a makeshift support structure, there is nothing to support the ground and chances are high that the tunnel will collapse. This is the daily routine for Karambakuwa (CQ), a tall slim artisanal miner.

Karambakuwa (CQ) has been a miner for 7 years, he glorifies God for making it home each day as his life hangs on a thread because of the nature of his job.

“It a dangerous game, at times water will be flowing underground but it’s better to risk than sit because I do not have many options in place to take care of my family,” says the father of three (CQ_Karambakuwa).

“I can go as far as 35 meters depending on the depth at which you find the gold belt and that belt will determine how the tunnel will shape up and the position you will be in when working, so you either work while standing, or on your knees or lying down” says the soft spoken Karambakuwa (CQ).

Karambakuwa (CQ) says they do not have protective clothing, equipment, and knowledge on how to mine safely, they only dig until they find a belt with gold, everything else is secondary.

News Value

In November 2020, a mine in Bindura (CQ) collapsed and it is estimated that about 20 artisanal miners were trapped underground, and people failed to rescue them (CQ_Sources). In the past year, the country recorded more than five mining disasters across the country (CQ_Sources+Reporter) Despite the disaster happening and the trade being risky, miners continue to engage in the illegal mining activities and the government buys gold from them, with no questions asked.

Background

Since February 2020, more than four mine collapse accidents occurred in Zimbabwe in areas mostly operated by artisanal miners with some bodies failing to be retrieved from the tunnels. (CQ_Sources)

According to the Zimbabwe Economic Policy Analysis and Research Unit 2016 study titled Best Practices for Supporting Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining in Zimbabwe, in 2014, the country had about 500 000 people engaged in small scale and artisanal mining (ASM), supporting about 2 million dependents across the country (CQ_Link, page 10).

“ASM activities are associated with informal, unregulated, undercapitalized, under-equipped and labour-intensive operations where technical and management skills are lacking,” states the study.(CQ_Link page 5)

A 2018 research titled Pathway to Formalisation of Artisanal Miners complied by the Zimbabwe Economic Policy Analysis and Research Unit notes that the government enacted a statutory instrument that “recognize the artisanal and small scale(ASM) mining sector thereby incorporating the sector into the national developmental plans.,”.(CQ_Link page 6)

“Gold mining, including artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), is the largest contributor to mining-generated foreign currency earnings. For the past three years, (2017 to 2019), gold deliveries from (ASM) to Fidelity Printers and Refiners (FPR) eclipsed deliveries by large scale mining (LSM). In 2019, ASM accounted for 63 percent (17 478,74kg) of total gold deliveries (27 650,26kg) to FPR,” notes a paper

compiled by Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association and Centre for Natural Resources Governance (CQ_Link).

Local Voices

Because their activities are considered illegal by law, Karambakuwa (CQ) says they are raided and arrested by police regularly, “but in some cases when you give the police officers money, they will let you go,” he says.

“Sometimes the prices offered by Fidelity Printers and Refiners (CQ) will be better but because I am not registered, I have fears that they might arrest me, so I sell to buyers who are always available at our mining points,” says Karambakuwa (CQ).

His trade has helped him to take care of his family and on a good day he goes home with $45 after selling 0.9 grams of gold.

Those who have lost relatives in mine disasters like Sophia Mbonje (44) (CQ_Sourcesheet) feel that the government should reign in all sites were illegal mining is taking place.

Mbonje (CQ) recalls how devastated she was when she heard that her 23 year old nephew, Bright Mbonje(CQ_Sourcesheet) was one of the artisanal miners trapped in the mine collapse at Ran Mine in Bindura (CQ_Link).

“I rushed to the shaft were the incident happened, I was hopeful that they will be able to rescue them, but it was to no avail.

“I and other relatives spent two weeks going to the scene to see if they will be able to at least retrieve the bodies and give my nephew a decent burial, but it was all in vain,” says Mbonje (CQ) in a teary voice.

Mbonje (CQ) a widow with two children says her nephew assisted her with paying rentals and other necessities but now she is unable to even support to the pregnant wife left by her nephew.

“If he was formally employed, maybe all this would not have happened, but he went into this trade to take care of his family as he had no other options,” says Mbonje (CQ) in a voice that echoed anger and bitterness.

Permanent secretary in the Ministry of Mines and Mining Development (CQ_Link) Onesimo Mazai Moyo (CQ_Sourcesheet) says the issue of accidents has been a source of worry for the ministry and have engaged other sister ministries and organizations to come up with a combined approach in dealing with the issue.

“We will be carrying out outreach programs in 2021 to ensure that all miners are fully aware of safe mining methods and health issues to do with those methods,” says Moyo (CQ).

He says they are working on a strategy to formalize the sector to bring them into the mainstream mining because some of them are not formalized. (CQ_Moyo)

“It’s not always easy to engage them if you do not have them in your register and you do not know where they are mining, it’s difficult to make any intervention but we will increase inspections in various mining locations including where they are mining so that they are educated on these aspects of mining,” he says. (CQ_Moyo)

Fradreck Kunaka (CQ_Sourcesheet) the general manager for Fidelity Printers and Refiners (CQ_Link) a government organization responsible for the buying and selling of gold says artisanal miners are a big player in gold production and in 2018 and 2019 their contribution was quite significant so much that they surpassed formal big scale miners.

Kunaka (CQ) says they have a more of a gentleman’s agreement of buying gold with no questions asked, “it’s more of a verbal agreement because the law has not been amended as to such, so it depends on the willingness of law enforcers to allow people to go under such arrangements were they are no questions asked or… they can still apply the law because the law is still as it was that if you are not authorized you cannot trade with an authorized person.

“We accept buyers as long that have any identification document to be able to at least say we received so much gold from this person,” he says.

He however says it is imperative for artisanal miners to be formalized.

“If it’s a cat and mouse situation as it currently is, there is no way we will be able to assist them in terms of maybe educating them on safer ways of doing their business because moment they see any regulator, they disappear…,” says Kunaka(CQ).

In contrast, national police spokesperson assistant commissioner Paul Nyathi, (CQ_Sourcesheet) says as police their mandate is to enforce the law and they do arrest artisanal miners who do not have proper documentation because they are operating illegally.

“Since last year we embarked on a clampdown of artisanal miners called Chikorokoza Ngachipere in Shona and 826 arrests were made as of January 12,” he says. (CQ_Nyathi)

Farai Maguwu (CQ_Sourcesheet) director for Centre for Natural Resource Governance (CQ_Link) says artisanal mining is illegal.

According to Statutory Instrument 95 of 2020 on Mining General Amendment Regulation (CQ_Link), application for a mining lease costs ZWL 10 000 ($122) (non-refundable), an ordinary prospecting license costs ZWL 1000 ($12) registration as an approved prospector for 5 years costs ZWL 20 000 ($244) and registration for a mining lease cost ZWL 25 000 ($305), among other costs.

Maguwu (CQ) says the costs are prohibitive and discourages artisanal miners from complying, that is why they continue to operate outside the law and because of that government cannot also intervene in terms of improving safety, health and environment within the artisanal mining operations.

Moyo (CQ) disagrees with Maguwu's (CQ) sentiments, he says if artisanal miners are contributing significantly to the economy, "I think our fees are worth very little compared to the gold they get but we are reviewing our fees from time to time to ensure that they don't stifle entrance into the industry," he says.

Next Step / Solutions

Karambakuwa (CQ) feels the government should at least educate artisanal miners on mining dangers and how they should conduct their work without fear of arrest.

LANGUAGE: Gamuchirai Masiyiwa translated some interviews from Shona to English.

EDITOR'S NOTES:

PHOTO CREDIT: Evidence Chenjerai